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# Standardized Testing in American Public Schools

Isaac Olson  
*University of Puget Sound*

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Isaac Olson

Suzanne Holland

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### **Standardized Testing in American Public Schools**

Politicians, educators, and educational reform advocates from all sides of the political spectrum agree: America's public schools are failing its students. However, the arguments for school reform on both the mainstream left and the mainstream right argue for precisely that: reform. I believe that the American Public School system as it is currently organized is so inherently unethical that it needs to be completely restructured, not merely reformed. Instead of "fixing" the standardized tests by which our schools and students are measured, they need to be abolished completely. Instead of focusing on efficiency and "job skills", our public schools need to focus on creating conscious, critical students, who are committed to creating positive social change for themselves and their communities. America's public school system (as I will shortly show) is a product of modernity. As the world continues the postmodern turn, the creation of a just and ethical public school system in the United States will require postmodern solutions, not modern reforms.

#### **The Standardization of Knowledge**

My critique of the public school system in the United States will focus on standardized testing. Though this testing is only one part of a flawed system, I believe that it is indicative of a deeper philosophical flaw within the system, and as such, standardized testing will, in this paper, be viewed as a sort of synecdoche for the public school system in the United States as a whole.

At the most basic level, standardized testing is unethical in that students and schools are assessed using tests that are inherently biased and unfair. Furthermore, because these tests are, more often than not, directly tied to the amount of funding that a school gets, many schools and students are punished by a system that is, from the beginning, working against them. The first inherent flaw of standardized tests is that they are “norm-referenced”. Norm referenced tests are not intended to measure teaching or learning qualitatively; in fact, they are designed “so that only about half of the test-takers will respond correctly to most items. The main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate; to spread out scores, not to gauge the quality of a given student or school”<sup>1</sup>. Put simply, these tests are designed to create a perfect bell-curve every time they are taken. No matter how high a level a given group of students may be performing, half of them will always be “failing”. While these tests may not be intended to measure teaching or learning qualitatively, the fact that public school funding is inextricably linked to these tests means that they are doing just that.

These tests are also unreliable as they cannot accurately measure what students have learned. Because the majority of these tests are formatted as multiple-choice, there is no way of accurately telling if a student worked to find a correct answer or merely guessed. The writing portions of these exams are no better; for the sake of efficiency, student writing is briefly analyzed to see if it fits the standard model. Writing that dares to display too much creativity and breaks from the standard form is marked down. Because of the way in which these tests are designed, critical thinking and creativity cannot be measured and are therefore punished while rote memorization, guessing, and “test-taking skills” are

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<sup>1</sup> Alfie Kohn, “Standardized Testing and Its Victims,” *Education Week* September 27, 2012.

rewarded. Even more damaging is the fact that because the stakes of these tests are often so high, valuable classroom time and large blocks of the curriculum are set aside to teach students how to take these tests and how to think in this superficial manner<sup>2</sup>.

Not only can the knowledge of students not be measured in any accurate way, the sort of knowledge that students are supposed to demonstrate on these tests reveals a bias in favor of the dominant culture. There is perhaps no more damning evidence to prove this than the fact that the primary indicator of how high a student will score is not their past school performance or IQ score, but rather, their parents income<sup>3</sup>. Not only can more affluent parents afford to send their children to more well funded schools or enroll them in expensive test preparation courses, they, by raising them in affluence, imbue them with a set of knowledge and skills that students of less affluent backgrounds do not typically have, giving them an unfair advantage. <sup>4</sup> Instead of recognizing these biases and differences, standardized tests treat every student as if they have all been exposed to the same knowledge and skill sets, and as if every student, coming from a uniform background, belongs to a pre-ordained category. This willful ignorance of the different abilities and socioeconomic backgrounds of American students is dehumanizing. However, even if this bias were to somehow be corrected the problem of rewarding low level thinking and punishing critical thought and creativity would still exist due to the previously discussed structures of standardized tests. Clearly, these tests are beyond mere "reform". The way in which they are designed is detrimental to all students, but especially for students who are of lower income or an ethnic minority.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Donald C. Orlich, "Test Scores, Poverty, and Ethnicity: The New American Dilemma," Phi Delta Kappa Summit on American Education. October 20, 2006. Page 1.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 22

If these so-called "high stakes" tests are tied to funding, and if these tests are in many ways biased against low-income and minority students, it stands to reason that the public schools that serve low income and minority students will suffer from a decrease in funding, which, unsurprisingly, is deeply detrimental to the students that attend these schools. While the details of the correlation between the amount spent on a school by a district and the performance of the students in that school is beyond the scope of this paper, it will suffice to say that poorly funded schools show a high number of students who struggle academically or drop out<sup>5</sup>. Simply put, high stakes, standardized testing rewards students who are affluent and punishes those who are not. There are many who see standardized test focused school "reform efforts", such as the infamous No Child Left Behind act as little more than a means by which schools across the nation can be shut down, so that corporate interests can establish more private schools conducive to their interests. The former Governor of Colorado, Bill Owens, admitted as much when he said that the motive behind Colorado's standardized test "reform" movement was to "greatly enhance and build pressure for school choice"<sup>6</sup>. Perhaps it goes without saying that the increased privatization of schools would be a catastrophe, as low income and many minority students would not be able to afford to attend these corporate, private schools, and the ones that found a way in would be subject to an educational curriculum that worked not in their interest, but in the interest of the businesses that founded them.

The broader implications of the intellectual and financial impoverishing of the public school system by these tests are horrifying. Students that "perform poorly" on these

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<sup>5</sup> Diana Kendall, "Class in the United States: Not only alive but reproducing," *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 24. 2006. 89-104

<sup>6</sup> Alfie Kohn, "Test Today, Privatize Tomorrow," *Phi Delta Kappan* 4. 2004,

tests are often forced to drop out so as not to threaten the school's funding. Students of all socioeconomic backgrounds that manage to make it through in all are intellectually impoverished. Those from privileged backgrounds unquestioningly accept their power and work to maintain it, while those who are not in positions of power are educated enough only to work to serve those who control the means of capital and cultural production. As a result, the dominant pedagogy and curriculum of most public schools across the United States works to create students across all cultural and economic borders for whom "conformity is valued over curiosity"<sup>7</sup>, so that the socioeconomic and racial status quo may be maintained<sup>8</sup>. Put bluntly, this system actively works to "[create] a permanent underclass"<sup>9</sup>.

Most scandalously of all, none of this is an accident. America's public school system as it now exists came to be in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, arguably both the high point and the beginning of the end of the cultural time period that we now call "modernity". It should come as no surprise then, that in an era where efficiency, science, and capital were valued above all, that the public school system of the United States should come to be purposefully designed after that other hallmark of modernity: the assembly line factory.

It is here that Michel Foucault's analysis of power relations will help us to understand why this is so. In his writings on the concept of panopticism in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault writes that power, that diffuse and decentralized power that Foucault argues invisibly shapes the lives of everyone, must not only bring its own effects "to their maximum intensity and to extend them as far as possible, without either failure or interval"

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>8</sup> Kendall, 90

<sup>9</sup> Orlich, 22

but also “to link this economic growth of power with the out put of the apparatuses (educational, industrial, military, or medical), within which it is exercised; in short, to increase the docility and utility of all elements in the system”<sup>10</sup>. In Foucault’s reading of the modern (and post-modern) condition, one of the main ways in which power is increased is through “the growth in the apparatus of production”<sup>11</sup>. It should come as no surprise to anyone, then, that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the educational system began to consciously mimic the “apparatus of production”.

In 1888, the Senate Committee on Education reported that “education is one of the principal causes of discontent of late years manifesting itself among the laboring classes”<sup>12</sup>. As a result of this fear, the unconscious mechanisms of power did indeed work to “increase the docility and utility” of those within the public education system. Education increasingly began to resemble industry, and as a result, the goals of those that controlled the apparatus of production began to be realized. None other than John Dewey, perhaps America’s most famous educational theorist, said in his famous “Pedagogic Creed” of 1897 that “Every teacher should realize he is a social servant set apart for the maintenance of the proper social order”<sup>13</sup>. Before long, this theory of education as industry and the means by which the social order was to be maintained had become doxa. The dean of education at Stanford University, Elwood Cubberly, said, in 1906, that schools should resemble factories “in which raw products, children, are to be shaped and formed into finished products...and the

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, “Panopticism,” *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow, Pantheon: New York, 1984. Page 207

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Derrick Jensen, *Walking on Water: Reading, Writing, and Revolution*. Chelsea Green: 2004. Page 37

<sup>13</sup> John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed”, *School Journal*. Volume 54, 1897. Pages 77-80.

specifications for manufacturing will come from government and industry”<sup>14</sup>. The Rockefeller Education board, one of the primary supporters of the still-nascent compulsory public education movement, released a statement, also in 1906, saying that students should “yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands...We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets, or men of letters”<sup>15</sup>.

While massive influence that standardized tests have on the educational system in the United States is a fairly recent development, it is rooted in a longstanding ideology. The reification of efficiency, progress, and capital, hallmarks of the modern era, are directly to blame for our deteriorating public school system a quintessentially modern, deeply unjust set of beliefs and practices that, in the post-modern era, must be done away with and replaced with a system that is grounded in an ethical system that confronts both the old beliefs of modernity and the new challenges of postmodernity.

### **The Postmodern American School**

Before we can examine what a postmodern school looks like, we must first critique the modern school system from a post-modern perspective. Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, with their examinations of how to ethically respond to “the other”, provide us with not only a means by which we can critique the modern school system, but also provide us with an ethical base upon which we might begin to construct an ethical, postmodern public school system.

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<sup>14</sup> Jensen, 37.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*



The public school system, through its standardizing model, dehumanizes students. Implicit in the very word "standardized" is the notion that the school is a factory, where blank, undifferentiated material might be turned into a standard product; a product, I would argue, is fit for little else than wage labor after the conformist, creativity killing, standardized education it received. This assumption of "sameness" is, I would argue, a type of knowledge, and a violent type of knowledge at that. Levinas writes that "Knowledge has always been interpreted as assimilation"<sup>16</sup>. In other words, to "know" a subject is to assimilate it in its totality into one's self. In this light, it seems almost absurd to think that a (hypothetical) middle aged, white, heterosexual, middle class male who designs a standardized could truly and totally know (another hypothetical) young, latina, lesbian, low income high school student. And yet, I would argue, that is precisely what the creators of standardized tests and the architects of the corresponding curriculum presume to do. By claiming that all students might have a fair shot at a test because it is "standardized", they are ignoring what Levinas would call the radical alterity of their students and by doing so, not fulfilling their task to educate them ethically. I would emphasize again that this goes beyond mere standardize testing; to design a curriculum that is supposedly appropriate for all students is indicative of the same problem. It presumes to "know" what skills students do and do not have when they enter a classroom or testing facility, and even worse, it presumes to "know" what it is that these students need to learn.

A Levinasian analysis of the standardized public school system in the United States would have little choice but to conclude that the relationship between the students and their educators (which includes not only their teachers, but the bureaucrats who design

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<sup>16</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, Duquesne University Press: Pittsburgh. 1985. Page 60.